Tools of the Trade
(or "Why Access Isn't Just the Name
of a Database Program")

This issue talks about how tools and practices change "the game." I am not sure really what "the game" is, but I certainly understand tools and practices. And—as long as we are talking about electronic gadgets—why, I LOVE tools!

At the lowest level, a "tool" is pretty easy to define. According to my handy Merriam-Webster Dictionary (the online version), it is a "device that aids in accomplishing a task." This definition works for me (pun intended)[1].

Do you have to be "intelligent" to use a tool? Depends on your definition of "intelligence." Anthropologists have decided that monkeys are intelligent because they have been observed in the wild using sticks to help dig and twigs to help them capture termites for food. While some previous co-workers come to mind with this anecdote[2], I would like to propose an alternative definition of tool use. To me, significant tools alter my "access." Let me elaborate.

Prior to the 1980s, computers were certainly awesome machines. They allowed users like me to automate processes that used to take me days (or weeks). My first personal computer allowed me to organize my VHS tapes, my CD collection, play games, etc. And then, I bought a modem. WOW—I was able to exchange programs and data with other users! We had bulletin boards to exchange programs, simple newsgroups allowing me to exchange thoughts ... and e-mail! I had access to others.

And then the Internet evolved. Stores put inventories online. Books and pictures and advertisements and Web sites abounded. Not only did I have access to others, I had access to information. Lots of it—but too much to easily manage.

And behold: Search engines came into being! In just a few years, we replaced saying "I'll look that up" with "I'll google that." In fact, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary gives the lower-case definition of "google" not as a noun (and a name for a search engine), but as a transitive verb! So now I can google—and have access to useful information.

And, during these years when the Internet was becoming as commonplace as indoor plumbing, another driving force was shaping our use of tools: the cell phone. Remember the "good old days" when you could leave your office and were expected to be unreachable for long periods of time? You received paper messages? Then the cell phone (and its diminutive cousin, the beeper) gave people instant access to others. Can't find them? Call. Can't get them to answer? Leave a voice mail. Haven't responded to voice mail yet? Txt them[3]!

And, I must confess that I did not stop with the cell phone: I use both an iPhone and an iPad. Never thought I would—after all, I just wanted my phone to make and receive phone calls. But once I tried it, I was hooked. I'm able to browse the Internet pretty much anywhere, anytime. Somebody wants to know the name of Judy Garland's stunt double during the "Wizard of Oz"? No problem: Snap out the phone, hit Google Search, and

find out[4]. And my iPad is even more addicting. I have about 20 books loaded on it, and can use it anywhere. If I desperately need Internet access, it has 3G capability—so that I don't look like a TOTAL geek[5] with an iPad in one hand and an iPhone in the other. I now have instant access to useful information combined with instant access to others. Anytime, almost anywhere. In fact, when I am driving home to visit my folks, I frequently check my phone to see what kind of coverage area I am in. If I don't see any bars of coverage, I compulsively check frequently until I am in range again. And wonder: Was anybody trying to reach me? We have become so dependent on our tools that we can't stand being out of access!

I used to tell the story about a boss I had many, many years ago. The rest of us were updating to new dual-core Pentium machines, a new operating system, and we were putting in a T1 line for really high-speed Internet access. And we got to thinking about our boss. A few of us made the suggestion that perhaps—to increase office productivity—we should give him a computer running MS-DOS 3.1, Internet access via a Hayes 300 Baud Smartmodem, and a 16-color 640x200 Color Graphics Adapter monitor. It might not have speeded up his access to us, but it would certainly increase our productivity by, oh, say 1,000 percent: His constant barrage of almost totally useless e-mails would slow down, and we could do real work.

Tools are work multipliers. They are supposed to permit you to do more in a limited time, and are supposed to make your life easier and more productive.

What tools do you use? How well do you use them? Does your use of the "tools of your trade" hinder others? Are you getting a Hayes 300 Baud Smartmodem for Christmas?

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Notes
1. Oddly enough, the very first definition I got when googling "tool" was from Urban Dictionary: "One who lacks the mental capacity to know he is being used. A fool. A cretin. Characterized by low intelligence and/or self-esteem." I'll save this definition for another column at a later date.
2. No names, but if you looked here, you were worried I was going to mention you, right?
3. While dictionaries do not yet define "txt" as a word, it is interesting to note that Microsoft Word did not flag it as misspelled!
4. Bobbie Koshay. Found it on my first try, using my iPhone, at <http://thewizardofoz.info>. Also note that Caren Marsh-Doll also helped out with blocking and camera tests.
5. Yeah—I already know. Too late. Don't e-mail.